

AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL AND LINGUISTIC APPROACH TOWARDS EXPRESSING PAIN

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*Abstract: Our article is based on an empirical study related to the way traditional thinking experiences, expresses, and considers pain, while also looking at alternative images of removing pain. We focused our study on examples from the Romanian, English, French and Hungarian languages, trying to understand that some universal truths lie behind the different words. The first part of our article, *The Perception of Pain* introduces some wider perspectives on how pain is perceived by patients and / or specialists. The second part, *Pain in the Traditional Mindset* presents a few insights into the significance of certain traditional words that express pain and the possible causes of pain. The article concludes that behind many of the idioms, proverbs, folk literature, and empiric medicines that have been used in allegories, magic, and symbols, there are some truths, messages, teachings or experiences that have been validated by science. An interdisciplinary approach may bring arguments in favour of looking afresh at traditional ways of intuitive thinking and language related to expressing pain.*

Keywords: anthropology of pain, heart, stomach, intuitive traditional thinking

The Perception of Pain¹

Pain is a large, exciting and challenging subject. It has endless possibilities for interdisciplinary approaches. In the eyes of doctors, whether allopathic or unconventional therapists, bodily pain is used to research the causes of sufferings and a diagnostic tool, to test the efficacy of the prescribed treatment. Most patients and doctors are particularly focused on pain, considering it a direct manifestation of the disease and a vital gauge for making therapeutic decisions. For allopathic medicine, the removal of pain is a primary necessity for healing the body.

But healers have a different point of view. They advocate the treatment of pain by activating the pain itself, the pain being a step in the healing process – Hering's law. Under this law, a favourable cure involves relieving the chain of problems, albeit with lesser intensity. In many alternative treatments, pain is considered a necessary step in "curing" the disease. Treatments used in acupuncture, homeopathy, medical recovery after surgery, physiotherapy are some of the examples. These constitute processes that may amplify the pain, and later removing it, by healing the body. Patients say the following: *hydrotherapy treatment routed my pain, that's why it is hurting me, but it's fine²*. It means that it has a positive effect. Some

¹ Amalia Pavelescu, *Perspectives on Bodily Pain in the Romanian Folklore*. In "This un-real body Anthology of essays", coord. Gabriela Mariana Luca, Stefanie Bouguet, Lenuta Giukin, Rodica Leta, Eurobit Publishing House, Timișoara, 2011, pp. 75-90.

² In Romanian, *Băile mi-au răscolit durerea. De aia mă doare. Da-i bine*.

therapists say: *step your pain and you'll be better!*³ There is another expression: *the hair of the dog (that bit you)*⁴, which is based on the same principle.

Pain may be caused by the patient himself, to create beauty. Cosmetic surgery, dieting, wearing tight clothes constitute some examples of assumed pain for aesthetic purposes. The folk expression *the old woman is suffering for her beauty*⁵ suggests that self-inflicted pain, for aesthetic reasons, at any age, is present in many cultures.

The acceptance and toleration of human pain is reflected in the theological perspective of pain, when pain, in this case, signifies payment for sins.

Psychologists and psychotherapists are interested in the causes of pain, and in ways of expressing, accepting, and removing it, through techniques such as Dynamic Spin Release (DSR)⁶ and psychological management⁷. Social workers want to know how pain is perceived by the people they assist, and they study this subject, using sociological research methods⁸. The studies are based on interviews and story – telling, about illness and healing⁹. Sociologists have studied groups of ill people, in a new branch of sociology, called medical sociology.¹⁰

The researchers' interest in pain has led to the development of a new branch in applied anthropology: the anthropology of pain¹¹, still in its infancy¹².

Contemporary anthropologists focus their research on modern people who want to escape pain as fast as possible. These people use numerous pharmaceutical products, provided by an industry in rapid growth. Advertising used by the pharmaceutical industry emphasizes the efficiency and speed with which pain can be removed. This has a massive effect on patients' attitude to pain. But the idea of the rapid removal of pain is not a new one. It is a very important part of traditional spells, charms and fairy-tales.

Traditional words and practices may give new clues to studying how people experience pain, and they may bring new insights into the anthropology of pain.

³ Ion Albescu, Romanian healer in Sibiu (*Calcă durerea și-ți va fi bine*).

⁴In Romanian, *cui cu cui se scoate*.

⁵In Romanian *suferă baba la frumusețe*.

⁶Dynamic Spin Release is an extraordinary approach consisting of several techniques and processes – that allows users to release their negative thought patterns, limiting beliefs and physical pain in as little as eight minutes. (Copyright © DynamicSpinRelease.com 2010).

⁷This is done through so-called cognitive-behavioural therapy, which seeks to ensure that patients understand what is happening to them, in the context of their painful suffering and try to change their erroneous opinions or beliefs regarding the pain.

⁸Ana Muntean and Venera Margareta Bucur, 2009. *Durerea și îngrijirile de sănătate din România*. In „Revista de Sociologie”, Sibiu, Editura Universității „Lucian Blaga”, anul VII, nr, 2, pp. 61-70.

⁹Theodora-Eliza Văcărescu, 2010. *În-corp-oricând boala. Convorbiri cu Zoltán Rostás*. In Laura Grünberg, (coord.), *Introducere în sociologia corpului. Teme, perspective și experiențe întrupate*, București, Polirom, pp. 141-175.

¹⁰The interest in this branch of sociology dates from 1950. Contemporary Romanian books on Medical Sociology: Iustin Lupu, I. Zanc, 1999, *Sociologie medicală. Teorie și aplicații*; S. Rădulescu, 2002, *Sociologia sănătății și a bolii*.

¹¹DelVecchio, 1992. DelVecchio Good Mary – Jo, Paul E Brodwin, Byron J Good and Arthur Kleinman, eds., 1992, *Pain as Human Experience: An Anthropological Perspective*, Comparative Studies of Health Systems and Medical Care, 31, Berkeley: University of California Press, 214 p., search on the Internet, 1.10.2010.

¹²Merrill Singer, *Applied anthropology – Pain as Human Experience: An Anthropological Perspective*, Academic Research Library, Jun 1994; 96, 2; p 457, search on the Internet, 1.10.2010; Good, Mary-Jo DelVecchio, Paul E. Brodwin, Byron J. Good, *Pain as Human Experience: An Anthropological Perspective*, University of California Press, 1994, search on the Internet, 1.11.2014.

1. Pain in the traditional mindset

In traditional mindsets, pain has physical or spiritual causes. It is generally located in a specific part of the body that aches. In our article we refer to the causes, manifestations, and ways of removing pain, by focusing on language expressions.

In general, Romanian ethnologists concentrated on customs, traditions and attitudes, without tackling pain directly. For example, Constantin Bărbulescu confesses that he used an ethnologic method, for a historical study of the human body¹³. Linguists are interested in the etymology of words related to the body and pain. Language can reveal the way pain is perceived by traditional mindsets.

In Romania, there is a saying: *One nail can be used to remove another one*¹⁴ – a proverb that could be also applied to pain and illness. This saying suggests that you have to undergo a new form of pain in order to cure the existing one. The principle of this wisdom is well known in empirical medicine. There are many examples of physical pains which are “removed” by amplifying first the pain itself. If we have a splinter in our finger, while removing it, we suffer, but after that, there is no more pain. Homeopathy is based on the same idea. For example, more than 100 years ago, someone who was infected with rabies could be cured by eating the brain of the animal that transmitted the disease, baked in bread, but also by suffering physical pain¹⁵.

The homeopathic principle can also be found in English expressions, sayings and wisdom: *To cure a dog bite, it was said that if you put a hair from the same dog into the wound, it would cure it*; the saying goes *the hair of the dog (that bit you)*¹⁶ being a metaphor for taking poison to cure poison. Also with snake bites, when you use venom as a cure¹⁷. In Hungarian, this proverb is well known, too¹⁸. The Romanian idiom, *Use a nail to remove another one*¹⁹ is similar in meaning to the English and Hungarian saying *the hair of the dog (that bit you)*. This proverb, which may be found in many other languages, illustrates an important principle which is applied in homeopathic medicine – removing pain and curing the disease by using the same type of poison you suffer from.

Traditional attitudes suggest that pain could be also a manifestation of sorrow. Sorrow is perceived as being a form of pain and suffering with a very clear “location”: the soul itself²⁰. In Romanian, there are the expressions: *to put on your soul*²¹, meaning to upload your

¹³Constantin Bărbulescu, 2005. *Imaginarul corpului uman între cultura țărănească și cultura savantă* (secolele XIX-XX), București, Editura Paideia, pp. 8-9.

¹⁴In Romanian, *cui cu cui se scoate*.

¹⁵In the village Sebeșel, one hundred years ago, a man was cured of rabies by eating the infected animal’s brain in a hunk of lightly baked bread. The treatment also consisted of making a cut under the patient’s tongue with a silver hook (knife). Gh. Pavelescu, *Valea Sebeșului, Monografie etno-folclorică*, Volumul II, Alba Iulia, Editura Reîntregirea, pp 319-320.

¹⁶Caroline Juler, English writer and artist.

¹⁷*Ibidem*.

¹⁸Jancsi Koppandi, Hungarian native speaker.

¹⁹In Romanian, *Cui cu cui se scoate*.

²⁰An example from folk poetry: *Sky is full of clouds, / As my longing soul. / Sky is full of stars / As my soul is full of sorrow*.

²¹*A pune la suflet*.

soul with sorrow and *my soul aches*.²² The soul seems to be a very important entity in the archaic mentality.

Sextil Pușcariu²³ thinks that the Romanian word for *soul*, comes from the same root as the verb *blow* and *breathe*.²⁴ The linguist Marius Sala also comments on the similarity between the verb to breathe (*a sufla*) and the noun for soul (*suflet*).²⁵ The Hungarians have a noun and a verb with the same root – *lélek* (soul) and *lélegez* (blow, breath)²⁶. When discussing the *soul*, we have to mention that conventionally, the soul corresponds to a palpable organ, *the heart*. Linguists consider that the Romanian word *heart* (“*inima*”) derives from the Latin one, *anima* (soul) and is used instead of *coeur*. This differs from other Latin languages.²⁷ For Lazăr Șăineanu, the word *heart* belongs to words with “specialized” meanings in Romanian. The linguist shows that there is a semantic distinction between this word and its Latin etymon, *anima*.²⁸ The idioms *Mă doare inima*, *My heart aches*, *J'ai mal au coeur* (French) are evident for the representation of pain in the heart. These idioms may express a physical pain, but also one related to feelings (pity) in Romanian, French²⁹ and English.³⁰

S. Pușcariu stated that “only in western Latin languages did the word *anima* preserve the meaning of soul, while in Romanian, heart (*inima*) replaced *cor*.”³¹ Comparing the Romanian *heart*, in the expression *my heart is aching*³² to the French *coeur* from *J'ai mal au coeur*, Pușcariu finds that both mean *stomach*, although the meaning developed independently in each language³³. A. I. Candrea and Ovid Densusianu³⁴ also commented on the similarity between the words *stomach* and *heart*. In French there is the same correspondence between the heart and the stomach. For expressing the uncomfortable feeling in the stomach, while being in the car, the French use the idiom with the word *coeur* (“*J'ai mal au cœur en voiture*”)³⁵.

In traditional thinking, the heart lay in the stomach and, using the studies of Bojan and I. Felix, Constantin Bărbulescu asks whether there was “an older representation of body, in which the heart was placed in the navel and the soul in what we today call heart”.³⁶ In fact, myocardial infarction and pain may actually manifest as stomach aches, and the Romanian

²²*Mă doare sufletul*.

²³ A Romanian linguist in the first half of the 20th century.

²⁴ *apud* Ion Viște-Georgescu, 2007, *Terminologie medicală populară*, București, Editura Maiko, p. 191.

²⁵ The director of the Romanian Linguistic Institute “Iorgu Iordan - Al. Rosetti”, Romanian.

²⁶ Jancsi Koppandi, *idem*.

²⁷ Ion Viște-Georgescu, *op. cit.*, p. 190.

²⁸ L. Șăineanu, *apud* Ion Viște-Georgescu. *op. cit.* 190.

²⁹ Agnes Duvocelle, French student in Romania.

³⁰ Caroline Juler, *ibidem*.

³¹ Sextil Pușcariu, *Locul limbii române între limbile romanice*, 1920, p. 33, and *Études des lingv. roumaine*, Cluj-București, 1937, p. 38, *apud* Ion Viște-Georgescu, *op. cit.* p. 190.

³² In Romanian, *mă doare inima*.

³³ Sextil Pușcariu, *ibidem*, p. 191.

³⁴ I. A. Candrea, Ovid Densusianu, *Dicționarul etimologic al limbii române, Elementele latine*, 1907, nr. 866 *apud* Ion Viște-Georgescu, *op. cit.* p. 191.

³⁵ Agnes Duvocelle, French student in Romania.

³⁶ Constantin Bărbulescu, 2005. *Imaginarul corpului uman între cultura țărănească și cultura savantă (secolele XIX-XX)*, București, Editura Paideia, p. 100.

expression *inima goală* (literally translated as *empty heart*, meaning your stomach is empty) implies that the heart actually lies in the stomach³⁷.

The sufferings of the soul (heart) are expressed by the pain felt in the soul (heart). Readers who have had great sorrows probably experience the pain in their hearts. The phrase *my heart hurts from sorrow*³⁸ illustrates this. Phrases such as *your heart hurts*³⁹, *to die of a bad heart*⁴⁰, *the heart breaks*⁴¹, *the soul hurts*⁴² suggest that spiritual pain could sometimes cause death. An ache or a pain in the heart may be caused by a genetic or vascular heart disease, but also due to soul sufferings. This possibility of a decisive influence on human health, through joy or shock, was presented by Mrs. Silvia Mancaș, Phd., cardiologist at the University of Timișoara⁴³, when she referred to positive and negative emotions which may cause vascular rupture and death.

The identification of the soul with the heart, and the heart and the stomach as being virtually the same, may have a scientific explanation.

In traditional thinking, grief is thought to be a disease. Lyric poetry abounds in such illustrations⁴⁴. The Romanian word for pain (*durere*) derives from the Latin *dolere*⁴⁵. The word *dor* meaning longing, derives from the Latin *dolus* (<*dolerite* “to hurt”) which explains the sensation of longing as pain.

The Romanian, English, French and Hungarian languages, and probably many others, express a universal truth: spiritual and “soul” sufferings can cause severe pain and illness. Intuitive thinking uses similar parallelism to find ways of removing pain. If pain is caused by manifestations of the soul (feelings), it is possible to remove the pain by showing affection, even if the pain has material causes. Intuitive ways of perceiving and removing pain explain the practice of kissing the “place” where the pain is felt, especially when a child is hurt. Language can send the following message: when the heart is suffering from sadness and grief, the body is suffering too, and this weakens the immune system. The gesture of ‘kissing the place better’ is a way of curing the pain by receiving affection.

Human beings have other ways of expressing pain which are as relevant as words: appearance (the colour of the face – white, red, yellow), the posture, the voice (tone) – *to shout with pain* or the unvoiced (*speechless with pain*). The appearance and voice are markers of the intensity of pain and may show how urgently medical treatment is required.

The lessons of language, as well as what the body “tells” and “shows”, have to be considered by other disciplines, such as medicine, anthropology, psychology, sociology, pharmaceutical industry, religion and social work.

³⁷Sextil Pușcariu and Marius Sala stated that in Romanian, the word *inima* (English heart) is used with the meaning of *stomach*. Cf. *op. cit.*

³⁸In Romanian, *mă doare inima de durere*.

³⁹In Romanian, *te doare inima*.

⁴⁰In Romanian, *a muri de inimă rea*.

⁴¹In Romanian, *a se frânge inima*.

⁴²In Romanian *mă doare sufletul*.

⁴³Paper presented at the Interdisciplinary Seminar, This Un-Real Body, Timișoara, November, 4th-5th 2010, CORPUS, International Group for the Cultural Studies of the Body.

⁴⁴*Much disease under the sun, / Not as burning as the longing. / As where the longing puts / Makes coal of the heart / Much disease under the moon / Not so crazy as the longing / As where longing lies / House of tears makes (Câtă-i boală pe sub soare, / Nu-i ca dorul arzătoare. / Că dorul dacă se pune / Face inima cărbune, / Câtă-i boală pe sub lună / Nu-i ca dorul de neună / Că dorul unde se lasă, / Lacrimilor face casă). Gh. Pavelescu, 1997. *Cântecele dorului*, Alba Iulia, Centrul Județean al Creației Alba, p. 53.*

⁴⁵Marius Sala, *op. cit.* p. 211.

Our short article is meant only to emphasize, and encourage reflection and understanding of what language and body language teach us, so as to benefit of other sciences and gain a better understanding of the human condition.

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